

## Proposal would furlough all county employees

### School system cooperation would be necessary

by Erin Cunningham and Marcus Moore | Staff Writers

The Montgomery County Council heard a proposal Tuesday to furlough all government employees, including school employees, for 1.5 days — a plan that would require buy-in from school system officials who so far have resisted furloughs.

However, some council members say that 1.5 days might not be enough, with some calling for up to five furlough days across the board.

"It would seem to me that perhaps five days of furloughs would give us more money, but less of a hit on our county employees, specifically MCGEO employees," said Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda.

Leaders of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization have said they were unfairly targeted by County Executive Isiah Leggett's (D) proposed budget. The proposal calls for two weeks of unpaid leave for 6,000 non-uniformed, nonschool employees — primarily those represented by MCGEO, which covers about 8,000 county employees.

Under Leggett's plan, the county would save \$15 million from furloughs, but the same amount could be saved if the county's more than 30,000 government employees take 1.5 days of unpaid leave, according to a memo released Friday by Stephen B. Farber, the council's staff director.

Council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring, who chairs the council's education committee, called that the "right approach" and said it would ensure equity, "instead of some employees having to take two weeks off without pay this year and one whole group not having to take it off; that just didn't seem fair."

The plan would require collaboration with government employee unions, Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

Although the council funds local education, the school system has the final say on whether or not it will furlough its employees. As of now, school system officials won't agree to furloughing their 22,000 employees.

Leggett suggested that the school system furlough employees in order to make up some of the \$137 million in MCPS cuts proposed in his budget, said county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield.

Schools Superintendent Jerry D. Weast told council members that furloughs could reduce productivity.

"Our work is learning," Weast said at the council's education committee meeting April 8. "Our work is getting kids graduated with the skill sets to go to that next level."

In response, Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg said that teachers could take their furloughs on planning days.

That's "not practical for us," Weast said. Those planning days are needed "to give your children the kind of education they deserve in Montgomery County," he added. If teachers had to take furlough days during regularly scheduled days, the schools would have to close, school officials say.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said the council is discussing options with school officials and that it's important both sides are "in sync."

Under Leggett's plan, furloughed employees would receive the equivalent of a 3.8 percent pay cut.

Under Farber's furlough proposal, all county employees would take a 0.6 percent pay cut.

Farber suggested that the furloughs could be progressive, with high-wage employees absorbing more of the burden.

Gail Powell, a school health room aide and MCGEO member, said she likely will seek a second job or a better paying full-time position if Leggett's recommended budget passes. Leggett's spending plan includes a reduction in hours for the health room aides — from seven hours a day to six hours.

"I can't afford it," Powell said of the potential lost wages. "Any wants in our family will be gone. It will all be needs."

On Monday, teachers union President Doug Prouty blasted Andrews' proposal to furlough teachers on planning days. "Taking away professional days is asking teachers to do the same work for less pay," he said.

Teachers are 10-month employees and are not paid for holidays, vacations and their time off during the summer, Prouty said. To make ends meet, the county should reconsider the \$4 million it is planning to give Costco to build in the county, he added.

County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At-large) of Garrett Park recently sent a letter to Leggett, stating that five of the nine council members support his proposal to provide \$4 million directly to Costco to help build the store. The proposal goes before the council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee this month or the next.

Andrews, who proposed furloughing all employees for between three and five days, said it would not be easy to convince school employees to accept furloughs.

Some school system employees, namely those represented by the Service Employees International Union, already aren't paid for 14 days during the school year, said Anna Oman, a spokeswoman for SEIU. Many para-educators, who are represented by SEIU, have seen their hours reduced from six per day to four hours in the past couple of years.

Also, Oman said, Leggett's budget is already \$137 million less than what the school board approved in February, so requiring furloughs "doesn't make sense."

Council members say they will continue to discuss the possibility with school officials and others who would need to agree to furlough employees before they can proceed.